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SUBJECT: Dominica's General Election Creates a Nearly One Party State

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#### Summary

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11. (C) Roosevelt Skerrit's Dominica Labour Party (DLP) won a landslide victory, capturing 18 of the 21 constituencies, with the opposition United Workers Party (UWP) relegated to only 3 seats. The final vote tally was 61 percent for the DLP, 35 percent for the UWP and 4 percent for the remaining parties. Even the opposition leader, Ron Green, failed to hold his seat. Although the election produced many tight races, with three constituencies being decided by fewer than five votes, the first-past-the-post electoral system once again produced an electoral result skewed heavily to the majority. The opposition announced that it plans to boycott Parliament for the time being as a protest over allegations of election irregularities that included the government flying in voters from overseas at party expense. CARICOM has officially announced the elections as fair and transparent, with the OAS statement likely to follow suit. The result leaves Skerrit, who has been the Eastern Caribbean leader most closely aligned with Hugo Chavez, firmly ensconced for five more years. End Summary.

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#### Winning Strategy

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12. (C) Prime Minister Skerrit's comfortable victory December 18 appears to have been based largely on his personal popularity and a populist message that carried well throughout the country. Out of 36,294 votes cast the result was 61 percent DLP, 35 percent UWP, 2.5 percent Freedom, and 1.5 percent for the remaining candidates. Skerrit effectively campaigned on his relationships with Venezuela and China, and how their government aid programs had proven integral to the country's development. Skerrit effectively portrayed large-scale projects of Windsor Cricket Stadium, the expansion of the airport, and the building of a sea wall as reasons for confidence in the future. Also, his Chavez-style populist message played well in a country that suffers from persistent high unemployment and poor infrastructural development.

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#### Election Irregularities and the OAS Position

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13. (C) While the Election Day voting seemed to proceed smoothly, with no indications of ballot stuffing or coercion, a number of potential violations of democratic principles in the weeks prior to the vote tarnished the results. The DLP restricted radio access (the main source of information) for the opposition to one private station that only has coverage in approximately one quarter of the country. The government stonewalled any attempt to update the voter lists, to provide any form of Voter ID, or to give any power to polling officials to enforce a provision of the election law that makes a voter ineligible if he or she has not returned to Dominica within the previous five-year period. The lack of voter identification is the most troubling, as voters were not required to provide any documentation proving their identity, and only needed to provide their name, occupation, and address to the presiding officers at the polling station. Even in cases where polling officials doubted the voter's identity or had a record of someone with the same name voting, a simple oath affirming one's true identity was all that was required to allow the vote to proceed. Direct and indirect bribes are also alleged to have occurred, most notably via the buying of airplane tickets to pre-screened members of the Diaspora living in the U.S. The main source of DLP campaign funding for such activities is alleged to have come from Venezuela and China.

14. (C) The CARICOM Observer mission called the election

"transparent" on December 22, despite not making it to the majority of the polling stations. The Organization of American States (OAS) observer team, in which an Embassy Poloff participated, indicated that it would also conclude the election to be free and fair. Such a declaration only applies to Election Day activities, of course, and does not attempt to delve in the myriad challenges brought by the opposition. Poloff's observations during the OAS mission confirm the basic position that Election Day activities were largely free of abuse. That said, the opposition's claims of pre-election maneuvering that were not fully in the spirit of fair and transparent elections merit further review in any full assessment.

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Opposition Failures and Boycott of Parliament  
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15. (C) The UWP's poor showing reflects the party's failure to create a positive, alternate vision for the future, instead running its campaign almost solely on an anti-Skerrit platform. The claims of corruption failed to resonate with the public, possibly in part because the UWP had its own serious corruption issues when it was last in power. The opposition leader and deputy leader lost both of their races, with only ex-PM Edison James, who had himself been run out of office because of corruption, performing well. Most notably, the third Dominican party, the Freedom Party, not only failed to win a seat, but was marginalized to the point of irrelevance. According to sources in the UWP, they plan to boycott Parliament in order to highlight the issue of campaign impropriety. The opposition now recognizes the need to radically change its approach, by potentially merging all opposition groups into a new party, electing new leadership, and creating a new platform with a more positive vision for the future.

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Lingering Disputes  
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¶6. (C) Due to the many tight votes, including districts decided by two, three and five votes, further recounts and appeals are likely. The more important considerations are the court cases having to do with Skerrit's alleged dual citizenship, the complaints about restricted media access, and likely challenges to chartered flights and Voter ID procedures. These challenges are unlikely to affect the election result.

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Comment

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¶7. (C) The election turned into a rout due to the first-past-the-post electoral system, Skerrit's personal appeal, the DLP's heavy edge in financing from its foreign backers, the use of government office to influence voters, the public's seeming disinterest in corruption as an issue, the lack of confidence in uncharismatic opposition leader Ron Green, and the extreme marginalization of third party candidates. The opposition boycott of parliament is unlikely to influence the government or the public, as most appear content with Skerrit and will view this tactic as sour grapes. Skerrit now has a strong mandate and will likely be more aggressive in pursuing his pet projects such as the Red Clinic, a Chavez-style operation that entails Skerrit personally disbursing cash handouts to citizens that plead for assistance. Without any significant obstacles from either the opposition or those within his party, Skerrit now has the opportunity to lead the country in whatever direction he seeks. Whether he chooses to tack hard to the left and further his links to Chavez, or decides he can now comfortably govern more from the center bears watching. If the allegations of sizeable campaign donations from China and Venezuela are true, those countries might also look to cash in on their electoral investment in the coming years.  
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